

SCRIPTURAL STATUTES OF LORD LAO

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TRANSLATED BY LOUIS KOMJATHY

HANDBOOKS FOR DAOIST PRACTICE

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INTRODUCTION

書

序

SCRIPTURAL STATUTES OF LORD LAO

The *Taishang laojun jinglu*“太上老君經律” (Scriptural Statutes of the Great High Lord Lao; DZ 786), abbreviated as *Laojun jinglu* 老君經律 (Scriptural Statutes of Lord Lao), contains some of the earliest principles and guidelines (precepts) for Daoist conduct and practice.

This text is part of a vast corpus of precept texts, texts whose concerns and recommendations vary depending on historical context and the Daoist sub-tradition involved.¹ The *Scriptural Statutes of Lord Lao* is a sixth-century anthology of Tianshi 天師 (Celestial Masters) conduct guidelines. It contains the earliest extant set of precepts, which also go back to the Celestial Masters movement, the

¹ Daoist precepts developed under the influence of Buddhist ethics (*sīla*) and monastic codes (*vinaya*). Traditionally, Buddhism identifies three essential aspects of training and discipline, namely, ethical conduct (*sīla*), mental discipline (*samādhi*), and insight or wisdom (*prajñā*). On the most basic level, ethical conduct consists of five general precepts and five supplemental precepts. The former is required of all Buddhists (lay and monastic), while the latter is specifically for monks and nuns. The five primary precepts are as follows: (1) Do not destroy life; (2) Do not steal; (3) Do not commit sexual misconduct; (4) Do not speak falsely; and (5) Do not take intoxicants. The additional five precepts include not eating after midday, not engaging in sensual activity (dancing, singing, etc.), not wearing bodily adornments (including jewelry and perfume), not sleeping in high or luxurious places, and not accepting material wealth. An alternative list includes not discussing the faults of others, not praising oneself while abusing others, not being covetous, not indulging in anger, and not defaming the Three Treasures (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha). Generally speaking, Daoist sub-traditions emphasizing ethical conduct adopted and advocated the five basic Buddhist precepts.

most well-known early form of organized Daoism. This tradition originated in a revelation from Laojun 老君 (Lord Lao), the “deified” form of Laozi and the embodiment of the Dao, to Zhang Daoling 張道陵 in 142 C.E. The Celestial Masters in turn became an organized “theocracy” in the land of Shu (present-day Sichuan) under the direction of Zhang Lu 張魯 (d. 216 C.E.), the third Celestial Master and grandson of Zhang Daoling. Zhang Lu is credited with authoring the *Laozi Xiang'er zhu* 老子想爾注 (Xiang'er Commentary on the *Laozi*; DH 56; S. 6825). Lost until the discovery of a manuscript copy at Dunhuang in the early twentieth century, the *Xiang'er* commentary provides some important insights into the worldview and practices of the early Celestial Masters. In addition, this commentary forms the basis of the so-called “Xiang'er Precepts,” a group of twenty-seven precepts found in the *Scriptural Statutes of Lord Lao*,² This set of guidelines for Daoist conduct also may have been compiled by Zhang Lu.

The section of the *Scriptural Statutes of Lord Lao* translated below (DZ 786, 1a-2a) includes two sets of Daoist conduct guidelines: (1) the *Daode zunjing Xiang'er jie* 道德尊經想爾戒 (Xiang'er Precepts from the Venerable Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power); and (2) the *Daode zunjing jie* 道德尊經戒 (Precepts from the Venerable Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power). These titles can easily lead to confusion since the first group is usually referred to as the “Nine

² The Xiang'er Precepts also appear in the *Yaoxiu keyi jielii chao* 要修科儀戒律鈔 (Notes on Essential Rules, Observances, Precepts, and Statutes; DZ 463) and the *Taishangjingjie* 太上經戒 (Scriptural Precepts of the Great High; DZ 787).

Practices” (*jiuxing* 九行) or “Nine Mandates” while the second group receives the designation of the “Xiang'er Precepts.” However, using the historical categorization of the “Nine Practices” and “Xiang'er Precepts” makes sense when one realizes that the former is derived from the *Laozi* 老子 (Book of Venerable Masters) or *Daode jing* 道德經 (Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power) and that the latter comes from the *Xiang'er* commentary itself.³ For this reason, I have amended the translation and Chinese text to reflect this understanding.

The Nine Practices relate to nine sets of technical terms and a variety of passages in the *Daode jing*. These precepts are prescriptive in nature; they are intended to inform one's activities and to promote beneficial patterns of interaction. The Nine Practices are divided into three sets of three, according to “higher” (first three), “middle” (second three), and “lower” (final three). In some sense, each precept may be understood as a short-hand or encrypted version of relevant textual passages:

1. Practice non-action (*xing wuwei* 行無爲): “I [abide in] non-action, and the people transform on their own” (ch. 57; see also ch. 3, 43, 63, and 64).⁴

³ According to the *Xiang'er* commentary itself, the precepts were to be used as follows: “Whenever human beings wish to undertake some action, they should gauge it against the precepts of the Dao, considering it calmly to determine that the principles of their action do not contravene the Dao. Only then should they gradually pursue it, so that the Dao of life does not depart from them” (Bokenkamp 1997, 100).

⁴ Bokenkamp translates this precept as “practice lacking falseness,” by which he means that the adept is advised to avoid contrived, artificial, or fabricated behavior. The more technical translation of *wuwei* as “non-action” encompasses this notion of effortless activity. Note also that Liu Ming, following Bokenkamp, translates the precept as “the mandate of honesty.”

2. Practice softness and weakness (*xing rouruo* 行柔弱): “Nothing in the world is softer and weaker than water./But attacking it with hardness and strength does not defeat it./This is because nothing can change it./Weakness defeats strength; softness defeats hardness” (ch. 78; see also ch. 36, 40, 43, 52, 55, and 76).

3. Practice guarding the feminine (*xing shouci* 行守雌): “Know the masculine, but guard the feminine./Become the streambed of the world” (ch. 28; see also ch. 10).

4. Practice being nameless (*xing wuming* 行無名): “The Dao is constantly nameless./Though its simplicity may seem trivial,/The world is unable to subjugate it” (ch. 32; see also ch. 1, 37, and 41).

5. Practice clarity and stillness (*xing qingjing* 行清靜): “Clarity and stillness are the rectification of the world” (ch. 45; see also ch. 15, 16, 39, and 57).

6. Practice being adept (*xing zhushan* 行諸善): “In dwelling, be adept at groundedness;/In [cultivating] the heart-mind, be adept at deepness;/In giving, be adept at humaneness;/In speaking, be adept at truthfulness;/In rectifying, be adept at regulation;/In doing, be adept in abilities;/In moving, be adept at timeliness” (ch. 8).

7. Practice being desireless (*xing wuyu* 行無欲): “Thus, constantly desireless you may observe the Wondrous;/Constantly desiring you may observe the boundaries” (ch. 1; see also ch. 3, 34, and 57).

8. Practice knowing how to stop and be content (*xing zhi zhizu* 行知止足):

“No calamity is greater than not knowing contentment./No trouble is greater than desiring attainment./Thus, the contentment of knowing contentment is constant contentment” (ch. 46; see also ch. 32, 33, and 44).

9. Practice yielding and withdrawing (*xing tui rang* 行推讓):

“Thus, the sage joyfully withdraws from the world and does not become tired./Because he does not compete,/Nothing in the world can compete with him” (ch. 66).

Many of the Nine Practices are also ways in which the Dao is described in the *Daodejing*. The Dao is nameless and desireless, and the Daoist adept, by following the above principles, can become an *embodiment* of the Dao. In addition, the Nine Practices clearly relate to two chapters of the *Daodejing* in particular; six of the nine precepts appear in chapters 10 and 57. The inclusion of chapter 10 is especially interesting as this contains some of the most technical practice descriptions in the entire text.

The Xiang'er Precepts relate to twenty-seven sets of technical terms and a variety of passages in the *Xiang'er* commentary on the *Daodejing*. These precepts are proscriptive in nature; they are intended to inform one's activities and warn against harmful patterns of interaction. The Xiang'er Precepts are divided into three sets of nine, according to “higher” (first nine), “middle” (second nine), and “lower” (final nine). The Xiang'er Precepts and their related passages are as follows: (1) Bokenkamp 1997, 80; (5) Bokenkamp 1997, 88 & 99; (6) Bokenkamp 1997, 97; (7) Bokenkamp 1997, 98; (8) Bokenkamp 1997, 134; (15) Bokenkamp 1997, 122; (18) Bokenkamp

1997, 79; (20) Bokenkamp 1997, 119-20; (25) Bokenkamp 1997, 116; and (27) Bokenkamp 1997, 130. As is obvious from this list, only ten of the twenty-seven precepts have corresponding passages in the extant *Xiang'er* commentary. One explanation for this is the fragmentary nature of that commentary; the Dunhuang manuscript only contains the commentary on chapter three through chapter thirty-seven.

As mentioned, it seems that the early Celestial Masters read and recommended the Nine Practices and Xiang'er Precepts as guidelines for Daoist conduct or behavior. This has led some to refer to them as “rules” or “moral obligations.” In this sense, they may be interpreted as mandates for communal participation and acceptance. This “moralistic” or “political” reading includes the possibility of abuse—individuals may be forced into pre-patterned and mandated forms of life. In contrast, an alternative reading would suggest that the Nine Practices and Xiang'er Precepts, as found in the *Scriptural Statutes of Lord Lao*, are practice guidelines.⁵ Rather than restricting their applicability to “conduct” or “behavior” one might suggest that they relate to every aspect of one's life, including physical, psychological, and energetic dimensions. They are principles and guidelines for Daoist practice. These sets of precepts relate and may be applied to any activity, situation, or interaction. They are a way of life.

⁵ In this respect, it is interesting that the character *lǜ* 律, translated as “statute” in the present context, also may refer to a series of tones in music and a poetic stanza. By extension, precept study and practice may enable one to resonate with and awaken to the Dao,

I would, then, return to the Nine Practices. From my perspective, these “precepts” are just nine selections out of an almost infinite range of possibilities. An individual adherent or Daoist community identified and extracted specific terms from the *Daode jing* and simply added “practice” (*xing* 行) to them. These were the principles that they found most relevant and beneficial to their life situations. Rather than simply elevating the selections of these individuals or groups, one may take them as pointing towards a model for dynamic interaction with the texts of the earliest Daoist “inner cultivation lineages.” For these early Daoist writings can (and perhaps should) be read as practice manuals. From the texts of the “Neiye” 內業 (Inward Training; abbr. NY) chapter of the *Guanzi* 官子 (Book of Master Guan), the *Laozi* 老子 (Book of Venerable Masters) or *Daodejing* 道德經 (Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power; abbr. DDJ), and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Book of Master Zhuang; abbr. ZZ), the following practice guidelines might be reflected upon and enacted.

1. **Practice completing inner power** (*xing chengde* 行成德; NY ch. 2; see also ZZ ch. 5).
2. **Practice cultivating the heart-mind** (*xing xiuxin* 行修心; NY ch. 5 & 6).
3. **Practice altering with the seasons** (*xing shibian* 行時變; NY ch. 7).
4. **Practice being aligned and still** (*xing zhengjing* 行正靜; NY ch. 8 & 16).
5. **Practice settling the heart-mind** (*xing dingxin* 行定心; NY ch. 8).
6. **Practice internal storing** (*xing neicang* 行內藏; NY ch. 15).
7. **Practice being inwardly still and outwardly reverent** (*xing nejing waijing* 行內靜外敬; NY ch. 22).
8. **Practice the way of eating** (*xing shidao* 行食道; NY ch. 23).

9. Practice circulating qi (*xingyunqi* 行運氣; NY ch. 24).

These are nine practices from the “Neiye.”

10. Practice emptying the heart-mind and filling the belly (*xing xuxin shifu* 行虛心實腹; DDJ ch. 3).

11. Practice blunting the sharpness and untying the knots (*xing cuorui jiefen* 行挫銳解紛; DDJ ch. 4 & 56).

12. Practice embracing the One (*xing baoyi* 行抱一; DDJ 10; see also NY ch. 9 & 24).⁶

13. Practice the Seven Practices (*xing qixing* 行七行; DDJ ch. 15).

14. Practice returning to the Source (*xing guigen* 行歸根; DDJ ch. 16).

15. Practice embracing simplicity (*xing baopu* 行抱朴; DDJ ch. 19).

16. Practice reducing selfishness and decreasing desire (*xing shaosi guaya* 行少私寡欲; DDJ ch. 19 & 48; see also NY ch. 26).

17. Practice not speaking (*xing buyan* 行不言; DDJ ch. 56).

18. Practice not competing (*xing buzheng* 行不爭; DDJ ch. 81).

These are nine supplemental practices from the Daode jing.

⁶ An alternative designation for this practice is “guarding the One” (*shouyi* 守一). The earliest occurrence of “guarding the One” is found in chapter twenty-four of *Inward Training*: “Expand your heart-mind and release it. Relax your qi and allow it to extend. When your body is calm and unmoving, guard the One (*shouyi* 守一) and discard myriad disturbances.” In *Inward Training*, guarding the One refers to a method of decreasing distractions and extrospection, of increasing stillness and introspection. It also refers to the attainment of a condition of mystical identification and unification. In the later Daoist tradition, “guarding the One” became a more general term for Daoist meditation, referring to a variety of different practices in different contexts (see Kohn 1989).

- 19. Practice free and easy wandering** (*xing xiaoyao you* 行逍遙遊; ZZ ch. 1).
- 20. Practice being useless** (*xing wuyong* 行無用; ZZ ch. 1 & 4).
- 21. Practice making all things equal** (*xing qiwu* 行齊物; ZZ ch. 2).
- 22. Practice caring for life** (*xing yangsheng* 行養生; ZZ ch. 3).
- 23. Practice fasting the heart-mind** (*xing xinzhai* 行心齋; ZZ ch. 4).
- 24. Practice hiding the world in the world** (*xing cang tianxia yu tianxia* 行藏天下於天下; ZZ ch. 6)
- 25. Practice freeing the bound** (*xing xianjie* 行解縛; ZZ ch. 6).
- 26. Practice sitting-in-forgetfulness** (*xing zuowang* 行坐忘; ZZ ch. 6).
- 27. Practice being not yet emerged from the ancestral** (*xing weishi chuzong* 行未始出宗; ZZ ch. 7).

These are nine practices from the Zhuangzi.

As mentioned, in the later tradition the five core precepts (*cūla sīla*) of Buddhism were adopted as the ethical foundation of Daoist practice. These precepts are as follows:

- Do not destroy life.
- Do not steal.
- Do not commit sexual misconduct.
- Do not speak falsely.
- Do not take intoxicants.

In Daoist practice, these five core precepts are sometimes associated with correlative cosmology or systematic correspondences. They receive correspondences based on the Five Phases (*wuxing* 五行), namely, Wood (*mu* 木), Fire (*huo* 火), Earth (*tu* 土), Metal (*jin* 金),

and Water (*shui* 水). The section below comes from the *Taishang laojun jiejing* 太上老君戒經 (Precept Scripture of the Great High Lord Lao; DZ 784, 14a-15a), a sixth-century C.E. Tianshi 天師 (Celestial Masters) text associated with Louguan tai 樓觀臺 (Lookout Tower Monastery; Zhouzhi, Shaanxi).

The precept to abstain from killing belongs to the east [and the phase wood]. It embodies the qi of receiving life and presides over growth and nourishment. People who kill will receive corresponding injury to the liver.

The precept to abstain from stealing belongs to the north [and the phase water]. It embodies the essence of greater yin and presides over resting and storing. People who steal will receive corresponding injury to the kidneys.

The precept to abstain from sexual misconduct belongs to the west [and the phase metal]. It embodies the substance of lesser yin and presides over men and women being pure and resolute. People who engage in sexual misconduct will receive corresponding injury to the lungs.

The precept to abstain from intoxicants belongs to the south and the phase fire. It embodies the qi of greater yang and presides over completion. People who consume intoxicants will receive corresponding injury to the heart.

The precept to abstain from lying belongs to the center and the phase earth. Its virtue is honesty. People who lie receive corresponding injury to the spleen.

Within contemporary Quanzhen 全真 Daoism, specifically the Longmen 龍門 (Dragon Gate) lineage in mainland China, three precept texts occupy a central position. In order of initiation, these include the *Chuzhenjie* 初真戒 (Precepts of Initial Perfection; JY 292; ZW 404), *Zhongji jie* 中極戒 (Precepts of Medium Ultimate; JY 293; ZW 405), and *Tianxian dajie* 天仙大戒 (Great Precepts of Celestial Immortality; JY 291; ZW 403). Here the *Precepts of Initial Perfection* is foundational. According to the text, the adept should be familiar and proficient with the five foundational precepts and the *Taishang ganying pian* 太上感應篇 (Chapters on Response and Retribution of the Great High [Lord Lao]) before focusing on the Ten Precepts of Initial Perfection (*chuzhen shijie* 初真十戒). The Ten Precepts of Initial Perfection are as follows:

Do not be disloyal, unfilial, inhumane or dishonest. Always exhaust your allegiance to your lord and family, and be sincere when relating to the myriad beings.

Do not secretly steal things, harbor hidden plots, or harm other beings in order to profit yourself. Always practice hidden virtue (*yinde* 隱德) and widely aid the host of living beings.

Do not kill or harm anything that lives in order to satisfy your own appetites. Always act with compassion and kindness to all, even insects and worms.

Do not be debased or deviant, squander your perfection, or defile your numinous qi. Always guard perfection and integrity, and remain without deficiencies or transgressions.

Do not ruin others to create gain for yourself or abandon your own flesh and bones. Always use the Dao to help other beings and make sure that the nine clan members all live in harmony.

Do not slander or defame the worthy and good or exhibit your talents and elevate yourself. Always praise the beauty and goodness of others and never be contentious about your own accomplishments and abilities.

Do not drink alcohol or eat meat in violation of the prohibitions. Always harmonize qi and innate nature, remaining attentive to clarity and emptiness.

Do not be greedy and acquisitive without ever being satisfied or accumulate wealth without giving some away. Always practice moderation in all things and show kindness and sympathy to the poor and destitute.

Do not have any relations or exchange with the unworthy or live among the confused and defiled. Always strive to control

yourself, becoming perched and composed in clarity and emptiness.

Do not speak or laugh lightly or carelessly, increasing agitation and denigrating perfection. Always maintain seriousness and speak humble words, so that the Dao and inner power remain your primary concern. (*Chuzhen jie*; ZW 404; 9a-9b; cf. *Chuzhen shijie wen* 初真十戒文; DZ 180)

These precepts provide guidelines for monastic conduct and ethical engagement in the world. Through reflection, application, and modification, the aspiring adept may establish harmonious internal conditions and beneficial patterns of interaction. The challenge is to find the way towards transformation or, alternately, to be what one is from the beginning. The cultivation of virtue (*de* 德) manifests as a transformational energetic presence.

At the present time, translations and studies of Daoist precepts are fairly scarce. Alternative translations of the Nine Practices and Xiang'er Precepts may be found in Stephen Bokenkamp's *Early Daoist Scriptures* and Liu Ming's *The Blue Book*. The latter also includes some interesting insights concerning “orthodox Daoist practice” from the perspective of a self-identified Euro-American Daoist priest. The *Laojun shuo yibai bashi jie* 老君說一百八十戒 (180 Precepts Spoken by Lord Lao; DZ 786, 4a-12b; DH 78; P.4731/P.4562), datable to around 350 C.E. and of unknown provenance, has been translated and studied by Barbara Hendrischke and Benjamin Penny. An alternative translation appears in Liu Ming's *The Blue Book*. Kristofer Schipper has published a study of these

precepts in terms of ecology in *Daoism and Ecology*, edited by Norman Girardot et al. The *Taishang ganying pian* has been translated by Paul Carus and D.T. Suzuki as well as by Eva Wong. The most comprehensive study, which includes translations of a variety of precept texts, is Livia Kohn's *Cosmos and Community: The Ethnical Dimension of Daoism* (2003).

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TRANSLATION

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SCRIPTURAL STATUTES OF THE GREAT HIGH LORD LAO

Precepts from the Venerable Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power

Practice non-action.

Practice softness and weakness.

Practice guarding the feminine. Do not initiate actions.

These are the highest three practices.

Practice being nameless.

Practice clarity and stillness.

Practice being adept.

These are the middle three practices.

Practice being desireless.

Practice knowing how to stop and be content.

Practice yielding and withdrawing.

These are the lowest three practices.

**Xiang'er Precepts from the Venerable Scripture on the Dao
and Inner Power**

Do not delight in deviance. Delight is the same as anger.
Do not waste your vital essence or qi.
Do not injure the ruling qi (*wangqi*).
Do not eat beings that contain blood, delighting in their flavor.
Do not yearn for merit or fame.
Do not become false, pointing at forms and calling them Dao.
Do not forget the methods of the Dao.
Do not try to affect things.
Do not kill or speak about killing.

These are the highest nine precepts.

Do not study deviant texts.
Do not covet glory or strive for it strenuously.
Do not pursue fame or praise.
Do not do things pleasurable to the ears, eyes, or mouth.
Always remain modest and humble.
Do not be trivial or easily provoked.
Always be reverent in religious undertakings, have a respectful
heart-mind and be without confusion.
Do not indulge yourself with fancy clothes and fine foods.
Do not overextend yourself.

These are the middle nine precepts.

Do not, if impoverished, strenuously pursue wealth and honor.
Do not commit any harmful act.
Do not establish too many taboos or avoidances.
Do not pray or make sacrifices to ghosts and spirits.
Do not strongly oppose anyone.
Do not consider yourself to be infallible.
Do not contend with others over right and wrong. When you
 meet with contention, withdraw from it.
Do not proclaim [yourself to be] a sage of great fame.
Do not delight in warfare.

These are the lowest nine precepts.

CHINESE TEXT

中

文

太上老君經律

道德尊經戒

行無爲，行柔弱，行守雌，勿先動。

此上最三行。

行無名，行清靜，行諸善。

此中最三行。

行無欲，行知止足，行推讓。

此下最三行。

道德尊經想爾戒

戒勿喜邪，喜與怒同。

戒勿費用精氣。

戒勿傷王氣。

戒勿食含血之物，樂其美味。

戒勿慕功名。

戒勿爲僞，彼指形名道。

戒勿忘道法。

戒勿爲試動。

戒勿殺，言殺。

此上最九戒。

戒勿學邪文。
戒勿貪高榮強求。
戒勿求名譽。
戒勿爲耳目口所誤。
戒常當處謙下。
戒物輕躁。
戒勿事當詳，心勿惚恫。
戒勿恣身，好衣美食。
戒勿盈溢。
此中最九戒。

戒勿以貧賤強求富貴。
戒勿爲諸惡。
戒勿多忌諱。
戒勿禱祀鬼神。
戒勿強梁。
戒勿自是。
戒勿與人爭曲直，得諍先避之。
戒勿稱聖名大。
戒勿樂兵。
此下最九戒。